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ABSTRACT

The provision of ongoing psychological services to small rural schools has been a continuing problem to administrators for some time. With the advent of Plan A Comprehensive Special Education in Texas, small districts with less than 3,000 average daily attendance were encouraged to form cooperatives for special education services. The challenge to provide continuous services was then presented to the Region IX Education Service Center which developed Project ASSIST, a program providing psychological services to rural schools. Project ASSIST is locally financed through a cooperative arrangement of participating districts. Presently, four full-time school psychologists provide week to week assistance to regional school districts covering a 14,000 square mile area. Using a consultant model, Project ASSIST provides six service components to teachers, students and others: (1) appraisal and programming for intervention; (2) inservice education; (3) counseling; (4) staffing; (5) third party consultation; and (6) program evaluation. This article describes these services. (Author)

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project ASSIST

Teachers Strategies for Intervention System of Supportive

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PROJECT ASSIST

A SUPPORT SYSTEM OF INTERVENTION
STRATEGIES FOR TEACHERS

PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES IN A RURAL REGION

Children with emotional, behavioral and/or learning problems often represent frustrating dilemma to the professional teacher. School psychologists have traditionally used diagnostic assessment, effective educational planning, and more recently, behavior-based techniques, counseling and other services in dealing effectively with children having identified school related difficulties.

So What is PROJECT ASSIST and What are the Project's Innovations?

In Texas and other states are small rural schools lacking the financial base necessary to support the services of a qualified school psychologist. The problem of any kind of on-going psychological services to small rural schools has been a continuing puzzle to administrators for some time. With the advent of Plan A Comprehensive Special Education in Texas, small districts with less than 3,000 average daily attendance were encouraged to form cooperatives for special education service. This was at least a part-time solution to the problem of meeting the needs of children with behavioral and/or emotional handicaps. The challenge to provide continuous services was then presented to the Region IX Education Service Center developed the innovative program Project ASSIST.

Project ASSIST is locally financed through a cooperative arrangement of participating districts. Presently four full-time school psychologists provide week to week assistance to regional school districts covering a 14,000 square mile area.

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OPERATIONAL PHILOSOPHY

Project ASSIST is a positive approach to providing a wide array of services to meet the growing needs of teachers. The intent is not to promote a single method or theory as the only viable resource but to encourage each psychologist and teacher to use his or her skills in a manner that yields the most effective results. What schools appear to need now is a focus on providing teachers with as many skill-building experiences as possible to enhance their professional growth and comptency.

Using a consultant model, Project ASSIST provides six service components to teachers, students and others:

1. APPRAISAL AND PROGRAMMING FOR INTERVENTION
2. IN-SERVICE EDUCATION
3. COUNSELING
4. STAFFING
5. THIRD PARTY CONSULTATION
6. PROGRAM EVALUATION

Consultation is becoming a by-word for the school psychologist, and Project ASSIST personnel are no exception. Teachers, parents, counselors, administrators and other supportive personnel involved in the welfare of students are the primary recipients of consultative services.

Consultation has come to mean many things. We emphasize purposeful listening, the sharing of ideas, and the continuing cycle of developing alternatives until an appropriate solution is reached. Consultation to us is teacher involvement plus continuing support rather than a one-time visit. We consider the consultant model the principal vehicle for interacting with teachers and communicating recommendations for intervention strategies.

APPRAISAL AND PROGRAMMING FOR INTERVENTION - SERVICE COMPONENT

The most indispensible component of Project ASSIST lies in its efforts to assess and recommend appropriate changes in classroom environments. Changes in classroom structure may include the systematic application of specific rules, particular physical arrangements, utilization of tangible reinforcement systems, and many other physical, curricular or stylistic interventions.

Central to any intervention in the classroom is the teacher and principal in the specific planning process. Where possible, all people involved in the educational process, including parents, are participants in the development of the intervention plan. The culmination of these efforts results in a written blueprint of action for implementation by teachers, parents, support personnel and others. All resources are surveyed and in some instances the best solution or reinforcer is found in the most unlikely of places.

Most plans for intervention come in response to a need to improve a student's behavior and motivation. In addition to the traditional support approaches of psychometric assessment, the project sought to provide a series of management approaches for the teacher to consider.

Contingency Management is a well known learning theory technology for the systematic regulation of high and low classroom behaviors. Total classes are usually involved in the application of Premack's principle to public education. Students use a signal system to communicate with the teacher and select particular reinforcers as rewards for completion of assignments. Teachers using this particular system have usually participated in a workshop or in-service which reinforces the positive approach.

Where the involvement of a total class is not possible, contingency contracting with individual or small groups of students is a popular alternative chosen by teachers. This system outlined by Homme is supported by the project

through in-service and sample contract forms supplied to teachers. This strategy is also used in assisting parents in school-related child management.

Also within the general scheme of behavior management, the project seeks to in-service teachers regarding a variety of reinforcement techniques. The general principles are outlined and teachers are encouraged to create their own motivation materials. Examples provoke a flurry of production on which the teachers utilize their own creativity to personalize the concepts of reinforcement.

Token systems of reinforcement are becoming more wide-spread in the public schools as teachers and administrators search for effective techniques. One such program within the region began as a point system for an entire school building where an innovative principal used a student lounge as the primary incentive. Points were earned by appropriate classroom behavior and assigned to students by their teachers. Students were involved in the daily audits of the economy and the dispensing of privileges. Here the students gained access to the lounge by accruing points. While in the lounge, they were free to purchase drinks and candy.

Not all intervention strategies require a high degree of teacher involvement. In some cases, direct arrangements are made between psychologist and student such as contracts for school reinforcement and counseling and/or parent and home privileges. In these instances, the teacher only reported to the psychologist regarding a student's behavior in relation to the agreed criterion.

In addition to the more directive methods just mentioned, Project ASSIST seeks to expand the positive effects of the classroom through affective education. The "Magic Circle" or Human Development Program has become an increasingly popular strategy for teachers. The program, articulated in materials and presentations by Valo Palomares and the Human Development Training Institute, emphasizes the development of personal effectiveness, self-confidence and an understanding of interpersonal relationships. This curricular intervention is becoming one of the most popular selected by teachers and counselors to meet and/or anticipate

the every day problems of student in the process of living. Here the teacher becomes a facilitator in enchancing the humanness of all students.

Briefly, the Magic Circle involves, in its ideal implementation, twenty minutes of the teacher's time in focusing upon a topic for discussion by a group of eight to twelve students. The other students may observe or work on daily assignments. All participants including the teacher follow four rules:

1. Everyone will have a chance to talk, but only if they chose to do so.
2. Everyone will be listened to.
3. No one will be put-down.
4. Everyone will receive about equal time.

Teachers who have attended the workshop and implemented the technique report enthusiastic success is not only facilitating student development but also in improving motivation and lessening classroom conflict. "Magic Circle" appears to enhance the humaness of teachers also.

IN-SERVICE EDUCATION

The ultimate success or failure of the efforts in education a child depends by a large upon the skills of teachers he/she meets. For that reason, and in response to legislative mandate, teacher in-service has become an integral part of any effective program for improving and enhancing education.

Project ASSIST seeks to promote in-service experiences for teachers that enhance their skills as educators. Too often teachers have considered in-service programs to be lack luster presentations of "what ought to be" rather than meeting their more immediate needs of what to do on Monday. The project organizes and conducts in-service programs designed to meet teacher's needs. Topics have included specific techniques and approaches to classroom management and motivation, such as Contingency Management, Responsive Teaching, parent counseling and others. Topics are usually selected through needs assessments and each in-service is comprehensively evaluated by the participants.

One special facet of the project's in-service training is a selected emphasis on affective education, primarily through the Human Development Program. The program trains teachers to implement a day to day curriculum for the development of self-concept and satisfactory interpersonal skills. This workshop has proven particularly helpful in initiating teacher change towards more innovation.

COUNSELING

After an initial evaluation of the student and a review of all available data, the school psychologist may select counseling as an appropriate intervention. This strategy may be implemented by the psychologist or local personnel.

Individual and group counseling are direct services offered by Project ASSIST to students, parents and teachers. Project psychologists utilize a wide array of approaches including rational behavior training, cognitive-behavioral and Gestalt techniques, as well as Carkuff's helping model.

When the type of problem demands and where time and distance become insurmountable, the psychologist may decide to utilize several other options that are usually available.

Each special education cooperative employs counselors to provide counseling services to special education students. These counselors serve as a viable referral source for those students who are in need of on-going counseling and follow-up. Project psychologists work closely with counselors in establishing counseling goals as well as follow-up and evaluation procedures.

Additionally, there are various agencies within the region to which the school psychologist may refer individuals or families. These agencies include - child welfare, mental health-mental retardation, vocational rehabilitation, state and private mental hospitals and psychologists in private practice.

Project ASSIST seeks to identify competent resources within the community and coordinate where possible a best of fit between client and helper.

STAFFING

We encourage an interface of school, home and community in meeting the needs of children.

Consequently, a team approach remains the most successful devise for seeking alternative solutions to complex, often inexplicable problems.

Periodic staff meetings, held in each of the local districts, review available data, develop the widest array of alternatives and recommend the most practical strategies to the student's teachers.

The staffing committee is comprised of all school psychologists in Project ASSIST plus supportive personnel, teachers, administrators and parents who share an interest in the students being staffed.

THIRD PARTY CONSULTATION

Within any social institution, conflicts among individuals are expected as a part of the fabric of interpersonal relation. In response to these situations,

and in an attempt to more amicably resolve differences between schools, students, parents and the community at large, the intervention of a third party is often critical in reaching a solution.

Project ASSIST seeds to provide this type of assistance to the school and community when needed. Often the addition of an outside source serves to clarify the issues in contention and generate a variety of alternatives for solution. Third Party Consultation is gaining greater utilization and promises to be a significant role for school psychologists.

PROGRAM EVALUATION

A common component of any program or project is the evaluation of it's effectiveness. Techniques and procedures vary from project to project but two questions are common to all: Was the project worth the investment? AND Did the project accomplish what it was designed to cccomplish?

Project ASSIST utilitizes a number of techniques in evaluating both the effectiveness of its staff and the project as a whole. Questionaires, surveys, baselines and detailed personal interviews assess the impact of the program on the teacher, the school district and the students themselves.

Because ASSIST is supported by funds under local management, the project must remain sensitive to community needs for its continued existence. The children tell us we are going in the right direction.

This is project ASSIST, a program of psychological services to rural schools supported by locally available funds. Project ASSIST is dedicated to the on-going support of teachers in the education of all children regardless of variance in abilities.